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## Albertus Magnus and the Emergence of late Medieval Intellectualism

Albertus Magnus was at the head of the late medieval Latin reception of both the near-totality of the esoteric texts of Aristotle and of the Arab thought that accompanied it (the *Aristoteles arabus*)<sup>1</sup>, as well as of many Neoplatonic sources that were greatly influenced by Aristotle's thought<sup>2</sup>, and he welcomed all this wealth without prejudice, very likely given his strong demarcation between religion and philosophy. An important feature of this «tradition» was an elaborate reflection on the intellect, the νοῦς, human or divine, forming the theoretical body we today call noetics, and knowledge of Aristotle's treatise on the soul, the *De Anima*, and of the Neoplatonic and Arab thought rooting in it, sparked an intense speculation on the nature and role of the human intellect.

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<sup>1</sup> If it is true that by the end of the 12th century the majority of Aristotle's works had already been translated, comprising the *corpus vetustius*, there seems to have been little interest in them until the middle of the 13th century, when the situation radically changed due to a great extent to Albertus Magnus' influence, calling for new translations and editions that would eventually constitute the *corpus recentius* (for a short but detailed account of the translations of Aristotle's works in the later Middle Ages, see for instance B. G. DOD, «Aristoteles Latinus», in N. KRETZMANN, A. KENNY & J. PINBORG (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1982, pp. 45-79).

<sup>2</sup> The notable case is the *Liber de causis*, mostly a compilation in Arab of passages from Proclus' *Elementatio theologica*; the Aristotelian influence was indeed so great that this work was known as *Liber Aristotelis de expositione bonitatis purae*, before Aquinas discovered its source.

Concerning this, Albert's commentary on the *Metaphysics* gives us an elucidation: as for the former, it is something divine (*divinum quiddam*<sup>3</sup>) in man, and this precisely because its role is one of «joining» itself with the divine intellect, cause and light of all beings and things known (*causa et lumen omnium entium et scitorum*<sup>4</sup>), in order to acquire their forms. Both the Peripatetics and the Neoplatonists had emphasized the divine or super-natural character of the intellect; both had postulated intelligible forms in it that allowed of cognition of reality; light had always been a favorite analogy to explain the way in which the agent intellect, or the νοῦς ποιητικός, transmitted the forms, or species, to the possible intellect; what is new is the «synthesis» (perhaps a «fusion» would render it better) between all these elements and Albert's Latin background, as well as an explicit «scientific» interest in the intellect, thus getting rid of the mystical overtones of many of his predecessors. Also interesting — and most importantly — is the fact that for him the intellect is not only the act of the soul, but its very essence<sup>5</sup>.

When Albert got in touch with the Arab noetics rooting in the Aristotelian dichotomy between the agent and the possible intellects<sup>6</sup> what he had in his hands was an already quite elaborate hierarchy of kinds or degrees of the intellect that accounted for the different levels of actualization, from mere potency to entelechy; in other words, they accounted for the different degrees of knowledge, from the mere bodily sensible structure to a complete body of apodictic knowledge totally independent from the body and the material world, and they did so in a perspective whereby the body was not discarded in the cognitive processes<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Metaphysica* I, 1, 1, ed. B. GEYER, *Opera Omnia XVI/I*, Aschendorff, Münster 1960, p. 2 (throughout this paper, pages and editions of primary sources are indicated only when necessary).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Met.* I, 1, 5, p. 7. Note the important distinction in Albertus Magnus, and in Scholasticism in general, between *lumen* and *lux*; briefly, and very generally, *lux* refers to the source of light or to its essence, whereas *lumen* refers to the medium through which *lux* appears or manifests itself. Thus, in noetics, whereas *lux* is the essence of the agent intellect, *lumen* can be seen as the intellectual forms or species it contains in itself. Cf. for instance Albertus Magnus' *De unitate intellectus* 3, 1 (ed. A. HUFNAGEL, *Opera Omnia XVII 1*, Aschendorff, Münster 1975, p. 22): *Sicut autem lumen solis se habet ad colores, ita quod non nisi sub actu lucis abstracti videntur, ita etiam est de formis imaginatis et in sensitivis acceptis ad lumen intellectus agentis*. Contrast with his *Met.* XI, 1, 9, ed. B. GEYER, *Opera Omnia XVI/II*, Aschendorff, Münster 1964, p. 473: «Quae lux intellectus est substantia ipsius intellectus [...]».

<sup>5</sup> *Met.* II, 1, 9, p. 472: «Supponimus enim intellectum agentem partem esse animae et esse formam humanae animae [...]».

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *De anima* III, 5.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Avicenna, *Liber de anima seu sextus de naturalibus* V, 6, ed. VAN RIET, Louvain 1968, p. 149: «Dum anima humana generaliter est in corpore, non potest recipere intelligentiam agentem subito».

The first tripartite hierarchy by Alexander of Aphrodisias<sup>8</sup> became gradually more complex and Avicenna, starting from Alfarabi's already complex division<sup>9</sup>, came up with the following hierarchy<sup>10</sup> that would be the basis for Albert's own:

1. Material intellect (*intellectus materialis*), or intellect in absolute potency: like first matter, it is the potency to receive all forms;
2. Intellect *in habitu*, or in possible potency: the intellect that has already received the first intelligibles, or the first principles such as «the whole is bigger than the part» and «things equal to another are themselves equal to each other»; it is in act (*in effectu*) in relation to the material intellect;
3. Intellect in act (*in effectu*), or in perfecting potency (*in potentia perfectiva*):
  - 3.1. *Intellectus accommodatus*: not only does it know the intelligible forms, but it also knows that it knows;
  - 3.2. *Intellectus adeptus*: it thinks whatever it wants to without making the effort of acquiring the intelligible forms;

*Intellectus sanctus*: an almost immediate contact with the agent intellect; a sort of prophetic spirit;

5. Agent intellect (*intellectus agens*), or in absolute act (*in effectu absoluto*): the giver of the forms; all the natural forms are to be found in it, from where they eternally emanate as an expression of its being.

Albertus Magnus accepted this hierarchy, but he operated two major changes: firstly, his *intellectus adeptus* did not merely represent an «automatic» increase in actuality, but it was the fruit of an act of contemplation and of a conscious effort; this was thus an ethical turn in the Aristotle-inspired noetics, and an important change (Alain de Libera sees it as the fundamental thesis transmitted to the Dominican school of the 13th-14th centuries<sup>11</sup>); secondly—and more fundamentally—, he

<sup>8</sup> 1. *Intellectus materialis* (νοῦς ὑλικός); 2. *Intellectus in habitu* (νοῦς καθ' ἐξῆν); 3. *Intelligentia agens* (νοῦς ποιητικός). See E. GILSON, *Les sources gréco-arabes de l'augustinisme avicennisant*, reprint Vrin, Paris 1981, p. 7-ff., for a synopsis.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 27-38.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *Liber de anima* I, 5, ed. VAN RIET, Louvain 1972, p. 96-100; *ibid.*, V, 5, p. 127; *ibid.*, 6, ed. van RIET, 1968, p. 148-9; *ibid.*, pp. 151-153.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. A. de LIBERA, *La philosophie médiévale*, PUF, Paris 1998, p. 399.

rejected the Arab doctrine of the separateness of the intellect, according to which there was only one agent intellect shared by the entire humankind<sup>12</sup>: if the Arab noetics had its origin in a cosmology of intelligences supporting an emanational metaphysics (the agent intellect was the 10th and last sphere in a hierarchy of celestial intelligences in what was an Arab innovation<sup>13</sup>; it was completely separate and its expression was the emanation of the intelligible forms), the Christian noetics could not dispense with such elements as the likeness between creature and creator, the immortality of the human soul, the moral responsibility of each individual concerning her/his thoughts, all aspects extremely difficult to conciliate with a doctrine that could be interpreted as implying that *the individual man does not think*. However, it was not against all Arab philosophers that Albert spoke, but against Averroes, who had concluded that not only the agent, but also the possible intellect was separate<sup>14</sup>.

This «democratization» of knowledge in the claim that each individual possesses all the different stages or degrees of the intellect—and thus of knowledge—and the highly intellectualist «psychology» in the postulation of the intellect as the essence of the soul make of Albert of Cologne the true father of an intellectualist turn in the 13th century that would later become the trademark of Dietrich of Freiberg and Eckhart of Hochheim. But in his own case, and contrary to that of these, this intellectualism did not give origin to an idealism: there are things in the world, independent from the human mind<sup>15</sup>, and the process of

<sup>12</sup> Besides in the *De unit. intell.* (op. cit.), Albert elaborates on this in other places; e.g.: *De XIV problematibus* I, ed. B. GEYER, *Opera omnia* XVII 1, Aschendorff, Münster 1975.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. H.A. DAVIDSON, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroës, on Intellect*, Oxford University Press, New York – Oxford 1992, p. 18.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *Commentarium magnum in Aristotelis De Anima libros* III, comm. 19, transl. in A. de LIBERA, *L'intelligence et la pensée*, 2nd ed., GF-Flammarion, Paris 1998, p. 109ff. Two aspects need clarification concerning this issue (for details, see Alain de Libera's Introduction to his translation of Aquinas' *De unitate intellectus contra Auerroistas*, GF-Flammarion, Paris 1997): Albert did not speak against Latin Averroism, his references to the *auerroistae* beginning only after 1270, date after which he wrote his *Summa of Theology*, and, as shown by de Libera, he actually defended Averroes by showing that there were two senses to the word 'separate': the first sense was that of separation from matter (*nec est corpus nec virtus in corpore*), and in this case Averroes was perfectly right, while the second sense was that of separation from all particular things, and he could not attribute such a radical sense to him; either way, Averroes was rescued (cf. Albertus Magnus, *De unit. intell.*, 3, p. 30; *ibid.*, p. 24).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *Metaph.*, I, 4, 8, vol. XVI/I, p. 57: «Ens autem scimus esse causatum primum causae primae et sic non esse commune causae et causato, sed potius ante omnem entis divisionem est haec

cognition of reality does not dispense with the senses<sup>16</sup> even if these are far from allowing of true knowledge:

In omni enim communi hominibus sensibili cognitione universale confusum et mixtum sensibilibus secundum sensum notius est [...]. Et hoc non est principium artis et scientiae, secundum quod sic singularibus permixtum est, sed potius prout est ad rationem simplicem et causam deductum per depurationem. Aliter enim in singularibus adhuc confusum obumbratum est ex materiae appendiciis et variabile secundum esse et non potest esse perfectae et certae cognitionis principium.

Aristotle, *Metaphysica* I, 1, 10, p. 15

Let us concentrate on these epistemic aspects, in order to verify in which way Albert's realism might have propelled an intellectualist «movement». First of all, and as already seen, he *individualized* thought, prompting the making of what we today call a «subject», namely in cognitive terms. Doing this, he also fomented the emergence of a more precise concept of «object of knowledge»; with this «epistemologically» clearer distinction between the subject and the object of knowledge, epistemology leaves its subordinate position regarding a specifically theological metaphysics, ultimately imposing itself over metaphysics tout court in the idealist core that follows Albert's intellectualism. This is the same as to say that he promoted the independence of epistemology as a «scientific» field of study. His ontological realism allowed of an intellectualist movement precisely due to this independence—a relative one, clearly—of epistemology from metaphysics. More specifically, he did this inside the problem of universals, which, since Abelard in the 12th century, had been in a state of dormancy, and the next step is thus to show in which way, rekindling this problem, he allowed the germination of an «epistemological» idealism within an «ontological realism».

But first of all I should like to clarify that Albert is not the father of a «new», or «renewed» noetics, as sometimes claimed<sup>17</sup>: he did not really change the noetic

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divisio : ens a seipso et ens ab alio. Also *ibid.*, VII, 5, 7, p. 383: [...] ostendimus ens non relative dici ad intellectum vel sensum, sed potius e converso».

<sup>16</sup> E.g.: *De unit. intell.*, III, §2, p. 27: «Omnia enim materialia corporalia subiciuntur talibus [non-localibus] et sunt passiva respectu eorum, et virtus intelligentiae penetrat ea, nec reguntur ab ipsa ; et quod hoc non est ab intellectu nostro, hoc est ideo, quia non efficitur in actu nisi ex acceptis a sensu, et ideo quod impedit sensum, per accidens impedit intellectum».

<sup>17</sup> E.g.: E. WEBER, «Eckhart et l'ontothéologie: Histoire et conditions d'une rupture», in E. Zum BRUNN et al., *Maître Eckhart à Paris: Une critique médiévale de l'ontothéologie*, PUF, Paris 1984, pp. 30-31.

doctrines he «synthesized», these being those of Aristotle, Plotinus, Dionysius the Areopagite, and of the Arab philosophers, and to speak of a «renewed» noetics in his case is to forget that these and other predecessors (e.g.: Abelard<sup>18</sup>) had, long before him, begun to defend—or to suggest the defence of—the supremacy of the mind over being. If one can speak of a «renewed» noetics in the late Middle Ages, this is due to the simultaneous «appearance» of Aristotle and his Arab commentators, who showed that a transcendent epistemology not only did not account for knowledge of reality, but also separated man from the Christian god; Albert, Aquinas, and even Bonaventure, would thus reject an abyss between the knowing subject and the things known in favor of the absolute character of knowledge founded on an immanentism that allowed of a likeness, or unity, between both poles of the cognitive process. If Bonaventure opted for an «expressionism» to save some of the transcendence apparently required in matters of faith, both Albert and his disciples clearly separated philosophy from theology when, paradoxically, they affirmed the immanent character of the verb.

Back to Albert and to the problem of universals. Firstly, this problem amounted to a very clear-cut—though far from simple—issue: are the universals (the ideas, or forms; the genus, species, and difference) actual things (*res*), or mere intellectual artifacts, namely names (*nomina*)? This originated in Aristotle's critique of Plato's ideas, namely concerning their separate character: in spite of the fact that the Stagirite did not entirely get rid of the Platonic ideas, because he needed the universal for knowledge of the particular (though this is not *existentially* reducible to the universal<sup>19</sup>, and despite his refusal to accept such knowledge in other passages<sup>20</sup>), he rejected that they could be substances, separate from the particular things; if they were so, this would render them utterly useless for cognition<sup>21</sup>. The truth is that Plato «disappeared» almost completely from the philosophical landscape (that is, practically all of his texts did), and the problem of universals seemed to have only one source: Aristotle. But this was mere appearance, because

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<sup>18</sup> I have here in mind his (in)famous distinction between the *modus subsistendi* and the *modus intelligendi* or *significandi*, which would allow the intellect the conception of roses even in case there were none; cf. *Logica «ingredientibus»*, *Glossae super Porphyrium*, in *Peter Abaelards philosophische Schriften*, I, ed. B. GEYER, Aschendorf, Münster in Westfalen 1919, p. 30

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *Met. A*, 1, 981a20-4.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. *De anima* II, 5, 417b16-23.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. *Met. A*, 9, 992a24-32.

contrary to the main issue of the universals, which balanced between the «absolute» reality of the universals and their solely mental «reality», the Stagirite had claimed that they were... both! And, if one decides to let in yet another stance somehow intermediary between those of the realists (the *reales*) and of the nominalists (the *nominales*), to wit, the conceptualists, he will satisfy all three<sup>22</sup>.

But, even more importantly, Aristotle's universals did not have much to do with those of the medieval philosophers, simply because his had mainly an «epistemic» function; they answered the question how we know things: because both the knowing subject and the thing known share the same intelligible form, immanent both to the thing and to the subject's soul, in act in the agent intellect, «awaken» in the possible one. This epistemic function is very much clearly expounded in his *Metaphysics*:

Experience is born in men out of memory; in fact, the many memories of the same thing acquire the strength of an experience. And it seems that experience is something almost like science and art, these originating in men through the former. Indeed, experience created art, according to Polus, rightly speaking, and inexperience fortune. Art originates when out of many observations of experience a universal opinion (μία καθόλου υπόληψις) is formed.

Aristotle, *Met.* A, 1, 980b28-981a7 (my transl.)

It is from experience, from the repeated remembering of the perception of a thing or event, that the universal «is born» in the soul: the accent on the epistemic function of the universal is evident; it is posterior to the first perception of a thing, and the process that gives origin to it is induction (ἐπαγωγή), an epistemic «tool» par excellence<sup>23</sup>. Metaphysical considerations are not altogether absent, since he claims that the universal contributes to the very knowledge of being (by attaining its λόγος or ὁρισμός, the definition<sup>24</sup>), but one can hardly claim that it has the main role.

It so happened that the emphasis given to the problem since its very beginning with Porphyry and throughout its perpetuation up to the later Middle Ages was «ontological». It is quite true that Porphyry tells the reader that the question of knowing what genus, species, difference, property, and accident are, is important to give definitions as well as to divide and demonstrate<sup>25</sup>, i.e. to know, but he

<sup>22</sup> E.g.: Alain de LIBERA, *La querelle des universaux*, Ed. du Seuil, Paris 1996, p. 71.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. *Anal. Post.* II, 19, 100a15-100b5.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. *Met.* Z, 4, 1030a6-7.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. *Isagoge* 1.

does it so that one can learn the doctrine expounded in the *Categories*, Aristotle's — main — ontological text. And thus it is the second paragraph of the *Isagoge*, of an almost ontological tone («what is the being of the universal?»), that really initiates the problem and hands it to the medieval world. To this ontological cargo, the logical weight characteristic of the high Middle Ages is added by Boethius, and with Abelard, to whom the universality is no more than the logical function of some words, as put by Gilson<sup>26</sup>, the problem of universals becomes ultimately an *onto-logical* problem.

It was precisely Albertus Magnus who redirected the problem to its Aristotelian *epistemological* roots, and he did it by distancing himself from the logicism of the Parisians, and by following in the footsteps of Avicenna, who firstly had linked the epistemological problem in Aristotle to his noetics<sup>27</sup>.

For Avicenna, the universal is an intention (*intentio*, translating the Arab terms *ma 'qûl* and *ma 'nâ*), the «tension» of thought towards an object, or, put more simply, what one wants to say. What one wants to say of a thing has nothing to do with its existence: for him, this is an accident of the essence, i.e. the quiddity of a thing (its «thingness», its *quid* expressed in its definition answering the question *quid sit*, what it is) does not entail its quoddity (its existence, its *anitas*, or the answer to the question *an sit*, whether it is). In the same way that one distinguishes between essence and existence, one has to separate the intention of «thingness» of a thing, i.e. its being one, a unity, from its universal character as being a unity in plurality; and in the same way that the existence is an accident of the essence, universality is an accident of the universal: the universal in itself is neither one nor multiple, horseness being nothing more than horseness (*equinitas non est nisi equinitas tantum*)<sup>28</sup>: it is the intellect that attributes to it this character of unity in the plurality<sup>29</sup>.

Given this, the function of the intellect is that of abstracting the universals, or the second intentions, *intentiones secundae*, from the first intentions, *intentiones primae*, the concepts or representations of things. This is for him man's most distinguishing feature:

<sup>26</sup> Cf. E. GILSON, *La philosophie au moyen âge*, 2nd ed., Ed. PAYOT, Paris 1947, p. 284.

<sup>27</sup> Put somehow differently by de Libera, *La querelle*, op. cit., p. 177: «Avicenne affronte directement le problème pendant de l'aristotélisme: lier la doctrine empiriste de *Métaphysique*, A, 1 à la doctrine du νοῦς, l'«intuition intellectuelle», qui complète la série de l'«induction abstraactive» dans les *Seconds Analytiques*, II, 19».

<sup>28</sup> Avicenna, *Liber de philosophia prima* V, 1, ed. VAN RIET, Louvain 1980, p. 228.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. *ibid.*



Quae autem est magis propria ex proprietatibus hominis, haec est scilicet formare intentiones universales intelligibiles omnino abstractas a materia, sicut iam declaravimus, et procedere ad sciendum incognita ex cognitis intelligibilibus credendo et formando.

Avicenna, *Liber de anima* V, 1, p. 76

Thus, Avicenna's essence is first and foremost «logical», but it has an «epistemic» function, since it is through it that one gets to know reality; therefore, it also has a «metaphysical» function: logic «captures», or «expresses» reality, because the *intentio secunda*, or universal, «expresses» the unity and sameness of an essence, regardless of the particular thing that possesses it<sup>30</sup>. This said, each particular thing is an object of knowledge, and the universals are objects of logic, and it is this knowledge of the particular, which expresses its essence, that is metaphysics proper.

However, this is not idealism, even if it seems that epistemology altogether replaces metaphysics; much on the contrary, the *intentiones* have their origin in the real thing independent of the mind of the knowing subject, more specifically in its nature or *certitudo* (Arab *haqîqa*), a property of the thing itself and not of the subject's, like the «subjective certitude» of modern philosophy, as de Libera points out<sup>31</sup>. However, there is «already» undoubtedly an «intellectualist emphasis», because the thing is not known in itself, but only through a process of universalization—still better: «cataloguing»—in the mind, the only way humans know a particular thing, and this makes me bracket de Libera's opinion: can one actually ever speak of «essence» without a subject? It is, after all, a logical property, or modality, and therefore necessarily belonging to the mind of the knowing subject. To use a more technical terminology, the *certitudo propria* of a thing, or its *esse proprium*, does not, in logico-epistemological terms, dispense with its *esse affirmativum*. Moreover, that in this context knowledge becomes wholly independent of existence corroborates this hypothesis of an intellectualist turn far more radical than Aristotle's: after all, for this there can only be knowledge of an existing thing; in other words, the essence, the *quid est*, is always of a *quod est*, a particular thing that actually is<sup>32</sup>.

Albert expresses this Aristotelian-inspired intellectualism in the formula

<sup>30</sup> See for example E. GILSON, *La philosophie au Moyen Age*, op. cit., p. 351.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. *La querelle*, op. cit., p. 201.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. *Met.* Γ, 2, 1003b26-7: ταὐτὸ γὰρ εἷς ἄνθρωπος καὶ ἄνθρωπος, καὶ ὢν ἄνθρωπος καὶ ἄνθρωπος (A man and man is the same thing, and an existing man is the same thing as man).

*veritas est adaequatio rei ad intellectum*<sup>33</sup>, truth is the adequacy of a thing to the intellect (or to the concept, which is the same)! This is the statement that, «if» the essence of a thing is its «truth», then there is no *esse proprium* without an *esse affirmativum*, there is no *true* thing in the world without the mind. We are now ready to establish the connection between this «epistemologized» metaphysics and Albert's participation in the problem of universals. His starting point is Avicenna and his tripartition of the universals in «states», of Neoplatonic origin<sup>34</sup>: the universals before the multiplicity (*ante multiplicitem*), in the multiplicity (*in multiplicite*), and after the multiplicity (*postquam fuerint in multiplicite*)<sup>35</sup>. The first state corresponds to the Neoplatonic *πρὸ τῶν πολλῶν*, before the multiplicity, and it is the universal in god, i.e. the verb; in the second state, the universal is *ἐν τοῖς πολλοῖς*, literally: in the many, and it is obviously the universal in the multiple things in nature that share it; in this state, it is a *discretio* and a *dispositio*, a mere disposition that prepares the intention. Finally, the third state of the universal, *ἐπὶ τοῖς πολλοῖς*, after the many, is the state that matters epistemically the most: salient is the fact that the universal becomes *epistemically* valid for us only after having been in the multiplicity, which might imply a strong realism, had Avicenna not warned that in that state it is merely a disposition to the creation of an intention in the mind; the intellectualist «twist» is evident again.

Together with Eustratus of Nicea's «wholes» (*ante partes, in partibus, ex*

<sup>33</sup> *Liber de praedicamentis* II, ed. BORGNET in *Opera Omnia* I, L. Vivès, Paris 1890, pp. 192-3: Ad hoc autem quod dicitur in adaequatione intellectus vel conceptus ad signum quod conceptum significat, dicendum quod conceptus vel intellectus vel opinio vel quocumque modo dici possit id quod est in anima (cujus voces prolatae signa sunt) non absolvitur a rebus quae sunt causa conceptuum: et ideo illis prout conceptae sunt res adaequatur: non enim sermo inventus est ad significandum conceptum fictum, qui non est nisi in concipiente, quia sermo inutilis esset, quia per sermonem audiens nullam de re conciperet veritatem vel significationem. Et ideo dictum Pythagorae et Heracliti non habet veritatem: quia dixerunt, quod verum est in apprehendendo vel opinando secundum quod opinio est opinantis passio: sed hoc verum est, quod verum est in opinando vel concipiendo secundum quod conceptus vel opinio est rei significatae aequata passio vel conceptio: et ideo sermo talis conceptui aequatus, aequatus est etiam rei: et ideo dicit Aristoteles quod veritas est adaequatio rei ad intellectum.

<sup>34</sup> E.g.: the commentaries on Porphyry's *Isagoge* by Ammonius (*In Porphyrii Isagogen sive V voces*, ed. A. BUSSE [*Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca* (CAG) IV, 3], G. REIMER, Berlin 1891), David (*Prolegomena et in Porphyrii Isagogen Commentarium*, ed. A. BUSSE [CAG XVIII, 2], G. REIMER, Berlin 1904), and Elias (*In Porphyrii Isagogen et Aristotelis Categorias Commentaria*, ed. A. BUSSE [CAG XVIII, 1], G. REIMER, Berlin 1900).

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Avicenna, *Logica*, Venice, 1508, f. 12ra; *ibid.* f. 12va.

*partibus*<sup>36</sup>), this is Albert's starting point—and an avowed one, for that matter<sup>37</sup>, though he also attributed it to the ancient philosophers, namely to Plato<sup>38</sup> —, and his tripartition<sup>39</sup> in universals *ante rem*, or in the verb, *in re*, in things, and *post rem*, or in the human intellect, will remain until the end of the 15th century as a trademark of the *via antiqua*<sup>40</sup>. This tripartition was in fact not a new thing for the Neoplatonists themselves, but it had never been an explicit one before them: if Plato had seen the ideas as existing primarily *πρὸ τῶν πολλῶν* in a supernatural realm, it is not at all clear in him whether they were also in things, given that all we know is that the objects of the world «participate» in/of them, which does not necessarily mean that they are present in the things themselves; Aristotle was convinced that, as seen by Plato, they were completely transcendent, and he accordingly denied them any epistemic value<sup>41</sup>. But his placement of the universals is not characterized by clarity either: according to him, they are in things as their second essences, and they are in the agent intellect in act too; as for the possible intellect, this has them only in potency (though he «also» claims that the soul is the place of the ideas)<sup>42</sup>.

This is what is new in Albert: while for Avicenna, following Aristotle, the universal can only become epistemically valid — as «after the multiplicity» — once transmitted to the human intellect by the «separate» agent intellect, which preserves Plato's transcendence of the forms in relation both to things and to the human mind, Albert radically rejects this state of affairs: when he says that the universals *post rem* are in the human mind, he says that they are there precisely in as «pure» a state as they are in the divine mind (*ante rem*), not owing much to the universals in things (*in re*). As a matter of fact, given that man is endowed with the two kinds of intellect, the agent and possible, the first being the [likeness of the] *intelligentia prima cognoscens et causans universale* and the second the

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Eustratus, *In Ethicam Nichomacheam Commentarius* (trans. Robert Grosseteste), ed. H. P. F. MERCKEN, *The Greek Commentaries on the Nichomachean Ethics of Aristotle I* (*Corpus Latinum Commentariorum in Aristotelem Graeca* 6/1), Leyde 1973, p. 69.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. *Super Porphyrium de V universalibus* IX, cap. 1, ed. M. S. NOYA, *Opera Omnia* I-1A, Aschendorff, Münster 2004, p. 144.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. *ibid.* II, 3; *Physica* I, I, 6, ed. P. HOSSFELD, *Opera Omnia* IV 1, Aschendorff, Münster 1987, p. 10; *De anima* I, I, 4, ed. C. STROICK, *Opera Omnia* VII-1, Aschendorff, Münster 1968, p. 8.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. *Super Porphyrium de V universalibus* II, cap. 3.

<sup>40</sup> For a detailed treatment of this question see Alain de Libera, *La querelle*, op. cit., pp. 253-ff.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. *Met.* Z, 14.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. *De anima* III, 8, 431b21: ἡ ψυχὴ τὰ ὄντα πῶς ἐστὶ πάντα.

*intellectus cognoscens* <sed> *non causans*, it is obvious that the universal *post rem* is in two different ways, one of which is in nothing different from the very universal *ante rem*. We thus have an *identity* between the universals *post rem* when they are in a relation to the first intelligence—an identity expressed in the formula *radius et lumen*<sup>43</sup> *intelligentiae agentis* and which is in principle valid only for the act of knowledge—whereas we talk of *abstraction* when the universals *post rem* are in a relation to the things themselves or to the universals *in re*. The following diagram (Fig. 1) shows these relations as they are elaborated on in *Super Porphyrium de V universalibus* II, cap. 3:

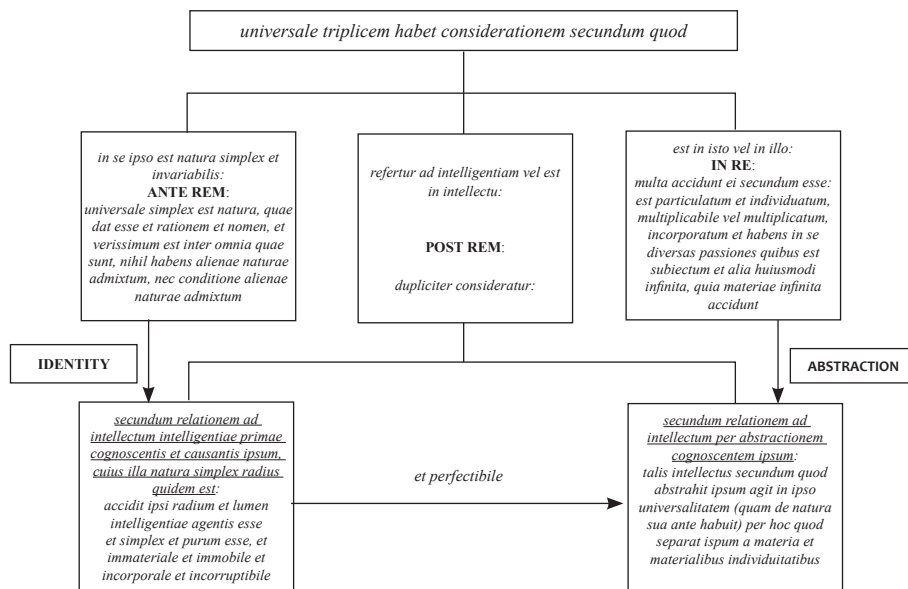


Fig. 1: Albertus Magnus' Tripartition of the Universals

Briefly, never before Albertus Magnus had the universals so explicitly kept their «divine» character while at the same time being clearly placed also in the human mind. And this is the fruit of his intellectualism, as one can see by means of a comparison with the voluntarism opposing it: for Bonaventure, the question

<sup>43</sup> See what was said above concerning the distinction between *lux* and *lumen*.

of the universals comprised two main elements, the universals in things and their «eternal notions», the universals in the verb, the notion of the universal not being entirely in the soul<sup>44</sup>. After Albert, the discussion revolves to a great extent around the universals in the human mind, which, in the act of knowledge, reestablishes the link between the universals in the verb and in things. One can truly say that epistemology gets the leading role in philosophical matters, and not even theology can impose itself upon it, as one of Albert's disciples, Dietrich of Freiberg, will show by refusing to accept Aquinas' suspension of reason, or nature, for the sake of faith<sup>45</sup>. As for Eckhart of Hochheim, though as far as we know he did not take a very active part in the problem of universals in the traditional way this was commonly approached<sup>46</sup>, he accepted Albert's tripartition to make a bolder claim: there is no difference whatsoever between the universals *ante rem* and those *post rem* as «causes of things<sup>47</sup>».

It is by means of this primacy of epistemology over metaphysics that Albert opens the door, perhaps paradoxically, to Ockham's nominalism. The «perhaps» is meant to placate those who see a true antagonism between realism and nominalism, when in fact the main opposing parties in the problem of universals were all «realists» in the sense that they all believed in the «reality» of the universals, substantially or mentally so. Concerning Albert's specific case, there is perhaps a too quick identification between his «metaphysical realism» and his «logical realism»: if the former is not altogether false, the latter is not completely watertight, because his universal *post rem* is certainly proof that he sees it as real enough—but as a mental content. Moreover, if the universal *in re* is to have something in common with those *ante rem* and *post rem*, of an apparently more logical character, then it cannot be some sort of «thing», challenging any radical

<sup>44</sup> Cf. *Les six jours de la création*, IV, 9 ; Paris 1991, pp. 176-7.

<sup>45</sup> See for ex. Ruedi IMBACH, «Pourquoi Thierry de Freiberg a-t-il critiqué Thomas d'Aquin?», *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie*, 45 (1989) p. 128-9.

<sup>46</sup> For Eckhart's «unorthodox» participation in this problem, see L. M. AUGUSTO, «Eckhart's *Bilder*», *Principios* 15:24 (2008) 167-186.

<sup>47</sup> *Expositio libri Sapientiae*, c. 1, n. 22, ed. J. KOCH - H. FISCHER, *Die lateinischen Werke* II, W. Kohlhammer, Stuttgart 1992, p. 343: «Rerum creatarum rationes non sunt creatae, sed nec creabiles ut sic. Sunt enim ante rem et post rem, causa tamen originalis ipsarum rerum. Propter quod per ipsas res mutabiles cognoscuntur ut per causas et scientia immutabili, sicut patet in scientia naturalium. Res autem ipsa extra quantum ad esse suum formale mutabile est, creabile et creatum. Et hoc est quod hic dicitur: creavit deus, ut essent omnia. Res enim in ipso sunt rerum rationes, Ioh. 1: 'in principio erat verbum' sive logos, quod est ratio; et Augustinus [De trin. VI, c. 10, n. 11] dicit quod est 'ars' 'plena rationum omnium'» (my emphasis).

interpretations making of him, inside this problem, an impenitent realist. Thus it is precisely his logical realism that helps to shadow his ontological realism, and if the talk is of logical realism, one does not see how it differs from nominalism in the first place: the «nominalists» were all «logical realists» par excellence, given that they reduced the universal to a mere mental *res*. But, and more importantly, Albert seemed to be quite aware that he was eating the cake and keeping it by concocting a *via media* between the realists and the nominalists, as de Libera pointed out<sup>48</sup>.

Interestingly enough, and corroborating this analysis, Albert takes Porphyry's alternatives in an already biased way, and this in favor of the intellect—and thus biased towards nominalism—, as the mere comparison between the sources will show:

Mox de generibus et speciebus illud quidem sive subsistunt sive in solis nudis purisque intellectibus posita sunt sive subsistentia corporalia sunt an incorporalia, et utrum separata an in sensibilibus [...].

Porphyry, *Isagoge Porphyrii*  
*Translatio Boethii*, 149

[...] [A]n ista quae genera et species dicuntur, in re subsistant, aut non quidem in rerum natura sint subsistentia, sed in solis, nudis purisque intellectibus **per abstractionem a rebus factam sint posita** [...] utrum corporalia sint an incorporalia [...] utrum sint in sensibilibus singularibus suis posita secundum esse, an sint extra singularia in rationibus solis mathematicis, sicut dixisse Plato refertur.

Albertus Magnus,  
*Super Porphyrium de V universalibus*,  
II, cap. 2, p. 19-20 (my emphasis)

The philosopher of Cologne inserts in the problem what for him is a given, i.e. the abstraction, carried out by the intellect, of the universals from things (see emphasis above), and with this his intention of postulating the universals primarily or even «solely» in the intellect is already quite evident. One has to realize that Albert's problem was far more complex than it may seem at first sight nowadays; he was a realist in the logico-epistemological sense because there was actually no easy way out of this for a Christian: the verb was true, it was part of the one person that was the trinity, and it was real, constituted by real *res*, namely

<sup>48</sup> Cf. A. de LIBERA, «Théorie des universaux et réalisme logique chez Albert le Grand», *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques*, 65 (1981), p. 56.

<sup>49</sup> Ed. L. MINIO-PALUELLO, *Corpus Philosophorum Medii Aevi*, Aristoteles latinus I 6-7, Desclée de Brouwer, Bruges – Paris 1996, p. 5.

by the *res solae metaphysicae* of many editions of the *Super Porphyrium de V universalibus*<sup>50</sup>, subsisting by themselves; but they would be nothing for us if they were not in our minds, too, and it is not at all easy to see how they would keep this substantial character once there. On the other hand, there is a world out there that is the expression of its creator, and the intellect somehow has to take that world into consideration; however, it is again the intellect that «actualizes» the universal, namely it is the possible intellect, «moved into actualization» by the agent one — just as color «moves» sight «into actualization» —, that «actualizes» the universality in the form<sup>51</sup>.

It is important to retain in this that the agent intellect is said to be the cause of whatever form is in it, while the possible intellect is merely capable of knowing, and not of causing (*cognitivus non causans*)<sup>52</sup>; but one has to keep in mind that Albert claims, against the *falāsifa*, that each individual has his/her own agent intellect, therefore attributing «creative» powers to the individual mind, too. This «creation» is the in-formation of things, the giving of forms or essences to things, and we know that these are precisely the universals! The problem is thus one of a «double realism»: a realism «of creation» and «of universals» that is to a great extent incompatible with the mental character of the latter, an incompatibility that is actually solved by nominalism, which accepts the reality of the universals

<sup>50</sup> Editio Papiensis of ca. 1490, Editio Veneta of 1494, Editio Lugdunensis of 1651, and Editio Parisiensis of 1890. In the edition here used, the editor chose the expression *rationes solae mathematicae* instead of *res solae metaphysicae* (see quotation above), which for obvious reasons does not seem a good choice; moreover, Albert seems to place the former on a lower level in relation to the latter (Cf. *Super Dionysium De divinis nominibus*, cap. 1, n. 10, ed. P. SIMON, *Opera Omnia* XXXVII 1, Aschendorff, Münster 1972, p. 5).

<sup>51</sup> *Super Porphyrium* II, c. 3, p. 24: «Per hoc autem quod est in intellectu, dupliciter consideratur, scilicet aut secundum relationem ad intellectum intelligentiae primae cognoscentis et causantis ipsum, cuius illa natura simplex radius quidam est ; aut secundum relationem ad intellectum per abstractionem cognoscentem ipsum. Et primo quidem modo accidit ipsi radium et lumen intelligentiae agentis esse et simplex et purum esse et immateriale et immobile et incorporale et incorruptibile et perfectibile intellectus possibilis, et eiusdem possibilis intellectus esse motivum ad actum, sicut color movet visum ad actum secundum actum lucidi, quod est in ipso, quando secundum actum color est. Secundum relationem autem, quam habet ad intellectum cognoscentem non causantem, habet quod talis intellectus, secundum quod abstrahit ipsum, “agit in ipso universalitatem” — quam de natura sua ante habuit — per hoc quod separat ipsum a materia et materialibus individuantiis ipsum. Et sic intelligitur quod dicit Aristoteles, quod “universale est dum intelligitur, particulare autem dum sentitur”. Et illud Avicennae dictum, quod intellectus in formis agit universalitatem».

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

solely in the mind. This explains why Albert is neither a full-fledged realist nor an accomplished nominalist, and why his solution to the problem of universals is the double stance realist-nominalist balancing an «epistemological reduction» of the universal to the intellect with an «ontological non-reduction» that is not an autonomy or an independence of the former vis-à-vis the latter.

This duplicity has its origin undoubtedly, as shown, in his Christian background, but it does not make of Albert's a sort of trinitarian dilemma, as defended by Alain de Libera<sup>53</sup>; Albert takes part in the problem of universals as a philosopher, and not, as de Libera's interpretation suggests, as a theologian. Proof of this is that he comes forward with a very technical concept, that of *aptitudo*, in order to manage to balance his quotas of nominalism and realism:

Per [...] aptitudinem universale est in re extra, sed secundum actum existendi in multis non est nisi in intellectu: et ideo dixerunt Peripatetici quod universale non est nisi in intellectu, referentes hoc ad universale quod est in multis et de multis secundum actum existendi, et non secundum aptitudinem solam.

*Liber de intellectu et intelligibili*, II, 2, 493b<sup>54</sup>

So, Albert had a theological background that did not allow him to «completely» eliminate the universals in things, but how does one explain that Avicenna, while separating essence and existence<sup>55</sup>, kept them in that state, too? De Libera offers the plausible explanation that such an elimination would mean an «epistemological solipsism of the *intention*<sup>56</sup>», but this explanation has two shortcomings: it is 1) a psychological explanation, attributing to Avicenna the unconscious insight of the dangers of 2) what is best defined—against de Libera's «euphemistic expression»—as an absolute idealism.

In spite of all his intellectualism, Albertus Magnus cannot be said to be an idealist, and this mainly because he lacks the «constitutionism» of his «disciple» Dietrich: although, as seen, he has the beginnings of an epistemological theory of the subject and of the object of knowledge, he does not have a theory of the «constitution» of the latter by the former. To some extent, this might be due to the fact that he, just like Avicenna, believed in the independence of the essence in relation to the existence: this is but an accident of the first; a single essence

<sup>53</sup> Cf. A. de LIBERA «Théorie des universaux», art. cit., p. 69.

<sup>54</sup> Venise 1494.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Avicenna, *Logica*, Venise 1508, f. 2rb.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. A. de LIBERA «Théorie des universaux», art. cit., p. 59.



can have different modes of being, in other words, several beings, without being affected by any of them:

Et ideo una et eadem est essentia in se et in anima et in singulari ; sed in anima secundum esse spirituale, in singulari secundum esse materiale et naturale, in se autem in esse simplici.

Albertus Magnus, *Super Porphyrium* II, c. 6, p. 35

Against this, Dietrich of Freiberg will explicitly state that the essence of a thing necessarily entails its existence<sup>57</sup>; as a matter of fact, it is precisely because a thing exists that it has an essence, and this is nowhere but in the intellect:

Obiecta enim non habent rationem causae respectu intellectus in actu, tum quia ad ipsum non pervenit motio obiecti, cum ipse nec sit corpus nec virtus in corpore, sed quid separatum secundum Philosophum, tum quia in cognoscendo non praesupponitur obiectum secundum propriam rationem obiecti, qua possit movere intellectum et secundum hoc habere rationem causae, sed potius in cognoscendo incipit habere obiectum propriam rationem obiecti. Obiectum enim intellectus est quiditas secundum Philosophum vel res secundum rationem suae quiditatis; hanc autem nequaquam apprehendit intellectus nisi distinguendo et determinando eius propria principia, quae Philosophus vocat partes formae, quas significat definitio.

Dietrich of Freiberg, *De origine*, 5, 26<sup>58</sup> (my emphasis)

Summing up: although Albert was not an idealist, he actually opened the door to the idealism of some of his «disciples» with a strong intellectualism that, inside the problem of universals, placed the verb also in the human mind. Moreover, he carried out a major epistemological revolution when claiming that truth is the adequacy of the object to the mind, thus causing the swansong of the earlier medieval motto according to which *veritas est adaequatio rei et intellectus*. Regarding more specifically the problem of universals, and namely his penchant for nominalism, his influence was huge and paved the way for more explicit forms of intellectualism, which, though they, too, do not end up forming idealist doctrines, show us the extremely intellectualist context in which late medieval idealism bloomed.

<sup>57</sup> *De ente et essentia* II, 1, 4, ed. R. IMBACH, *Opera Omnia* II, Felix Meiner Verlag, Hamburg 1980: «non possum intelligere essentiam hominis, nisi intelligam esse actuale eius».

<sup>58</sup> *De origine rerum praedicamentalium*, ed. L. STURLESE, *Opera Omnia* III, Felix Meiner Verlag, Hamburg 1983.